

OVERVIEW & INTRODUCTION

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▪ Reading of 1 Corinthians 8 (NKJV & ESV)

▪ Subject Matter of 1 Corinthians 8

After a first reading of the chapter, it is clear that the subject matter is "Food offered to idols". However, as we delve deeper into the chapter, we shall see that this chapter deals with more than just this basic/front-line issue. Beneath and beyond it, there is another issue that Paul wants to address.

▪ Location of 1 Corinthians 8

8:1 ~ Now concerning things offered to idols . . . We note that the same formula was used in 7:1 (Now concerning the things you wrote to me . . .) and we will see it again in 12:1 (Now concerning spiritual gifts . . .) This alerts us to the fact that Paul is here (starting from 7:1) answering questions that the Corinthian Christians have posed to him. In other words, we are in the Confusion Section of the epistle. (See Study on 1 Corinthians 1:10-17)

Relation with Chapter 9 & 10: What Paul started addressing in 8:1 goes on into Chapter 9 and 10. In fact, his last word on this issue is 11:1 ~ Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. In other words, we need to remember that what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 8 is not everything he has to say on the subject matter. He has two more chapters of 'things' to talk about.

▪ Background of 1 Corinthians 8

Religious: *The city of Corinth is a very religious city. The people would be offering sacrifices to their gods and in most cases, the sacrifices can be divided into 3 parts: (a) What is offered up (b) Given to the priests and (c) the remainder that the worshipper brings home.*

Social: *The temple is often the place where people would meet socially. Meaning, a party, a wedding, a function will be held there. If you choose not to attend, then you are cutting yourself off socially from your fellow citizens.*

Christian concerns: *Can we Christians go to the temple and attend the functions held there? May we eat the food being served? In addition, the priests may not eat*

all the meat given to them via the sacrifices. They are likely to sell it to the butcher in the market and the butcher will then re-sell them to the citizens. As Christians, can we buy them? How will we know from where the meat comes? Should we find out? And if our friends / neighbours who are not believers take home the final third of the meat, and invites me to his home for a meal, what then? Can I go? Should I go? What is the right thing to do?

Verses 1-3

After telling us that the subject matter is “food offered to idols”, yet he says nothing about it in these 3 verses. Instead, he talks about knowledge and about love. It is clear therefore that Paul wants to deal with the deeper and broader issue first, before he deals with the issue at hand.

- *We know we all have knowledge (v1b)*
“We all have knowledge” appears to be a popular saying/slogan from some of the Corinthian Christians. And hence it appears that Paul is quoting what they have been saying, and he said: We know we all have knowledge! It is a rebuke (albeit gentle) to these very arrogant Christians in the church of Corinth. You boast about your knowledge, about what you know (with respect to this matter). There’s nothing special about your knowledge! It is common knowledge among Christians all over the world – all of us (generalization) know it as well!
- *Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies (v1c)*
Paul is going to address the issue of eating food offered to idols, but he wants to deal with the attitude of some of the Christians first. Those “knowledgeable” Christians were boasting about what they know. Paul says, “Knowledge puffs up!”

Is he against knowledge? No, for what he is saying from 8:1-11:1 is giving them instructions, knowledge! The Christian Faith is not anti-knowledge. What he is rebuking is knowledge alone, knowledge without love. Without love, you will be arrogant, and what you do will be rather destructive. But with love, and with knowledge, what you do will build up!

John Calvin: “We must, therefore, lay it down as a settled principle, that knowledge is good in itself; but as piety is its only foundation, – “The fear of God is its only true foundation” -- it becomes empty and useless in wicked men:

as love is its true seasoning, where that is wanting it is tasteless. And truly, where there is not that thorough knowledge of God that humbles us, and teaches us to do good to the brethren, it is not so much knowledge, as an empty notion of it, even in those that are reckoned the most learned. At the same time, knowledge is not by any means to be blamed for this, any more than a sword, if it falls into the hands of a madman."

- *And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know (v2)*

Paul is still focusing on 'knowledge' because the people were boasting about how much they know. Do you boast in having knowledge? At its very best, knowledge is incomplete on this side of eternity. What you know is nothing compared to what you don't know! Knowledge is the process of passing from the unconscious state of ignorance to the conscious state of ignorance, of moving from thinking you know everything to knowing you know nothing! True knowledge does not lead you to be proud over what you know but humility in what you do not know! "Nothing is so arrogant as ignorance."

- *But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him (v3)*

The right concern is not how much you know, but if you love God! You can know a lot and have no love for God, and hence you are a condemned man! But if you love God, then you are known and hence loved by God!

What is Paul saying in these 3 verses and why did he say it?

At the end of the day, spiritual progress/maturity is not measured by how much we know, but by how much we love! The crucial thing is our love -- for God and for others.

Verses 4-6

- *... we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. (v4b-c)*

Here Paul agrees with what they were saying. An idol is nothing! Indeed!! And there is only one God in this world - the God we worship, the God of the Bible.

- *For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords) (v5)*
No doubt the unbelievers believe in all sorts of gods. In fact, the people will divide the world up into various spheres and areas, and different gods will be in charge of different spheres and areas.
- *Yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; (v6a-c)*
But in truth, there is only one God. Who is He? He is the Father. He is the Creator – of whom are all things. And He is the One whom we should live for – we for Him!
- *... and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live (v6d-f)*
And this God has sent His Son Jesus Christ into the world. Who is Jesus? He is the One through whom are all things, meaning He was present before the world exist and it was through Him that the world was created. And we are alive today because of Him – through Him we live. He sustains our life now!

What is Paul's message in these 3 verses?

Paul affirms the basic Christian message – there is one God and there is one Mediator between God and men. But he didn't only state the doctrines. He draws out the implications – there is one God, hence we must live for Him, for His glory. There is one Mediator, hence we must turn to Him. In fact, He sustains our life.

Paul here basically agrees with those “knowledgeable” Christians about what they know and believe. You are not wrong. In fact, you are right. But the problem is not with what you know, but how you use what you know! What is missing is love!

Their attitude appears to be: This we know. So this is how we will act. You have concerns? That's your problem, not mine! I will not be held back by you!! Paul wants to address this attitude.

Verses 7-13

- *“However, there is not in everyone that knowledge” (V7a)*

How does this square with what Paul said in verse 1 ~ “We know we all have knowledge”? That statement was a general statement, meaning Christians everywhere knows the truths that you claim to know. Here however, he is pointing out that there are some believers in the church @ Corinth that do not yet have this knowledge.

Who are they? Why do they not have this knowledge?

➤ *“... for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled.” (V7b)*

Those in the church who don't have this knowledge, are likewise described as people whose conscience are weak. Further, in verses 11-13, they are called 'brother/brethren' as well as those who Christ died for.

In all likelihood, these are new believers who have just left their pagan religion and come to faith in Christ. They are still surrounded and affected by many of the pagan ideas and beliefs, and having grown up with their pagan religion all their life, it is still (now) hard for them to eat food offered to idols. Doctrinally, they may confess that God alone is God, but somehow, emotionally and mentally, they still have some fears of the idols, they still regard the food offered to idols as offered to some gods. Their conscience held to the conviction that it is wrong to eat these food.

Note (1): The fact that we come to faith in Christ, it does not mean all our background influences have been wiped cleaned. Some things remain in our consciousness, and may continue to influence/affect us for some time.

Note (2): The Bible tells us what is right and what is wrong. The Bible is our final authority and we must submit to the Bible. Besides the Bible, God gives us our conscience. God has written His laws in our conscience so that in the unfallen/sinless state, our conscience will say exactly the same thing as God's Law. But we live in a sinful, fallen state today. Our conscience therefore may not say what God's Law say. What then? We must educate our conscience, bringing it in line with the Law of God. However, we must never act against our conscience, because God has designed us such that we obey our conscience. To act against our conscience is to harden it, and that is to sin against our conscience.

John Calvin: Now, on the other hand, he calls them to consider, that there are many weak and ignorant persons associated with them, to whom they ought to accommodate themselves. "You have, it is true, a correct judgment in the sight of God, and if you were alone in the world, it would be as lawful for you to eat of things offered to idols, as of any other kinds of food. But consider your brethren, to whom you are debtors. You have knowledge; they are ignorant. Your actions ought to be regulated not merely according to your knowledge, but also according to their ignorance." This reply is particularly deserving of notice; for there is nothing to which we are more prone than this, that every one follows his own advantage, to the neglect of that of others. Hence we feel prepared to rest in our own judgment, and do not consider, that the propriety of those works that we do in the sight of men depends not merely on our own conscience, but also on that of our brethren.

- *But food does not commend us to God; neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. (V8)*

This could be Paul quoting another slogan from the Corinthian Christians. They were saying, "No big deal! Food does not affect our spiritual state ultimately. So eat!" Paul would agree with the main thrust of their slogan.

Or it could be that Paul is telling them here that food must not take central place in our Christian Life. It does not matter whether you eat or not eat. There is something else that matters more.

Whatever it is, the message is the same finally: Food does not commend us to God. Food must not be allowed to take such a prominent place in our Christian Life. Something else must.

What is it?

- *But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak. (V9)*

Our greater concern, Paul says, is whether by our action, we will "stumble" our fellow believers who are weak. The word 'stumbling block' is 'proskomma' in Greek, which means an occasion to apostasy!

Paul is therefore rebuking the attitude that insists on one's right and can't be bothered about what happens to others, even fellow believers; even if that action

could and would lead that fellow believer to apostasy! Paul is underlining the seriousness of the matter!!

Your action can have very serious consequences!!!

- *For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? (V10)*

Paul is here giving an example. Let's assume you see no problem going to the temple of an idol and have a meal there. You claim what you know has liberated you, and it is perfectly within your rights to do it. Now, a fellow believer who is weak sees you doing that, and he is emboldened to do it. The word 'emboldened' is exactly the same word used in verse 2 where Paul says love edifies/builds up! In other words, you by your action, maybe even by your actions, build him up to eat food offered to idols. His conscience, however, remains weak – still says 'No' to doing a thing like this. What happened then? Paul does not say in this verse, but clearly, the brother is led to act against his conscience, which is a very dangerous thing. By acting against your conscience, you harden it, and the next thing you come face-face with sin, you may actually do it! You put yourself effectively on the road to apostasy!

- *And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish? (V11)*
Here Paul underlines the consequence that he left unsaid in verse 10. Your weak brother will perish. The word 'perish' is 'apollumi' which means to destroy fully, to die, to lose.

Paul is here building his case, he is underlining the seriousness of their "don't care" attitude. He says, "See the final result your action can produce – he will perish!"

John Calvin: And he expressly desires that regard be had to the weak, that is, to those who are not, yet thoroughly confirmed in the doctrine of piety, for as they are wont to be regarded with contempt, it is the will and command of the Lord, that regard should be had to them. In the meantime, he hints that strong giants, who may be desirous tyrannically to subject our liberty to their humor, may safely be let alone because we need not fear giving offense to those who are not drawn into sin through infirmity, but eagerly catch at something to find fault with.

John Calvin: Be it so, that thou hast knowledge; he who seeth thee, though he is not endowed with knowledge, is notwithstanding confirmed by thine example to venture upon the same thing, while he would never have taken such a step if he had not had one to take the lead. Now when he has one to imitate, he thinks that he has a sufficient excuse in the circumstance that he is imitating another, while in the meantime he is acting from an evil conscience." For weakness here means ignorance, or scruple of conscience.

- *But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. (V12)*
Here Paul increases the seriousness of their act - when they act in this way, they don't just sin against their brethren. They sin against Christ!

And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' (Matthew 25:40)

Paul wants them to see the seriousness of their act.

- *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble. (V13)*
Here Paul tells them how he himself will apply what he has just said above. So highly does he place the spiritual wellbeing of his fellow brothers --- even those who are weak - that if eating meat (not just food offered to idols, but just plain meat) causes his brother to stumble, he will be a vegetarian all his life! He will say to his brother, "You are more important to me than this piece of steak!"

The word 'stumble' is 'skandalizo' in Greek, which means to entrap, to trip up, to entice to sin. It must be understood in accordance with the 'perish' and 'stumbling block' used in verse 11 and 9. In other words, it is not a simple 'offended/peevd' but one that leads others to be trapped spiritually, to fall headlong into sin, into apostasy.

We recall the words of Jesus:

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. (Matthew 5:29)

"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes! If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire. (Matthew 18:6-10)

The words of Jesus must be taken seriously. He is pointing out that our actions have serious consequences, as serious as causing ourselves or others to fall into apostasy! The focal point here is on man's responsibility.

There is no discussion in the text concerning "perseverance of saints" or "election". We know that those whom Christ died for, they will never perish. Christ said so! We know that those whom God has elected shall be justified and glorified. God said so!

Here, all Paul is doing is to underline the seriousness of our "selfish" act!

John Calvin: But, however difficult it is to act up to this doctrine, so far as the meaning is concerned, is easy, were it not that some have corrupted it by foolish glosses, and others by wicked calumnies. Both classes err as to the meaning of the word offend For they understand the word offend to mean, incurring the hatred or displeasure of men, or what is nearly the same thing, doing what displeases them, or is not altogether agreeable to them But it appears very manifestly from the context, that it means simply to hinder a brother by bad example (as an obstacle thrown in his way) from the right course, or to give him occasion of falling. Paul, therefore, is not here treating of the retaining of the favor of men, but of the assisting of the weak, so as to prevent their falling, and prudently directing them, that they may not turn aside from the right path. But (as I have said) the former class are foolish, while the latter are also wicked and impudent.

Lessons

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Over and above the issue of whether one should eat food offered to idols, there is a bigger and deeper issue we must all confront - love! Our conduct must be governed by love - to God and to others.

We must learn to view the other Christian, not just as a fellow member of the church, not just as a good friend, but as a brother for whom Christ died!

APPENDIX

1 CORINTHIANS 8 (ESV)

¹Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that "all of us possess knowledge." This "knowledge" puffs up, but love builds up. ²If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. ³But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.

⁴Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but one." ⁵For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords" – ⁶yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

⁷However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. ⁸Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. ⁹But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ¹⁰For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? ¹¹And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. ¹²Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. ¹³Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.